



What Is a Literacy Work Station?

You enter the classroom. Students are working with partners all around the room doing all kinds of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Yes, they are talking, but they're actually talking about what they're reading and writing! All twenty-seven are engaged in their work and look like they're happy to be at school. How did the teacher orchestrate this? She must have bribed them with a reward, like a pizza party. The room isn't very large, but every part of it is being used. You thought you needed a huge room to do this, but this teacher has managed to make it work, even though she teaches in a small space. You notice that some kids are using the whiteboard and the overhead; others are gathered in small groups at their desks; some sit on the floor; several are in a corner classroom library space. Surely they aren't on-task!

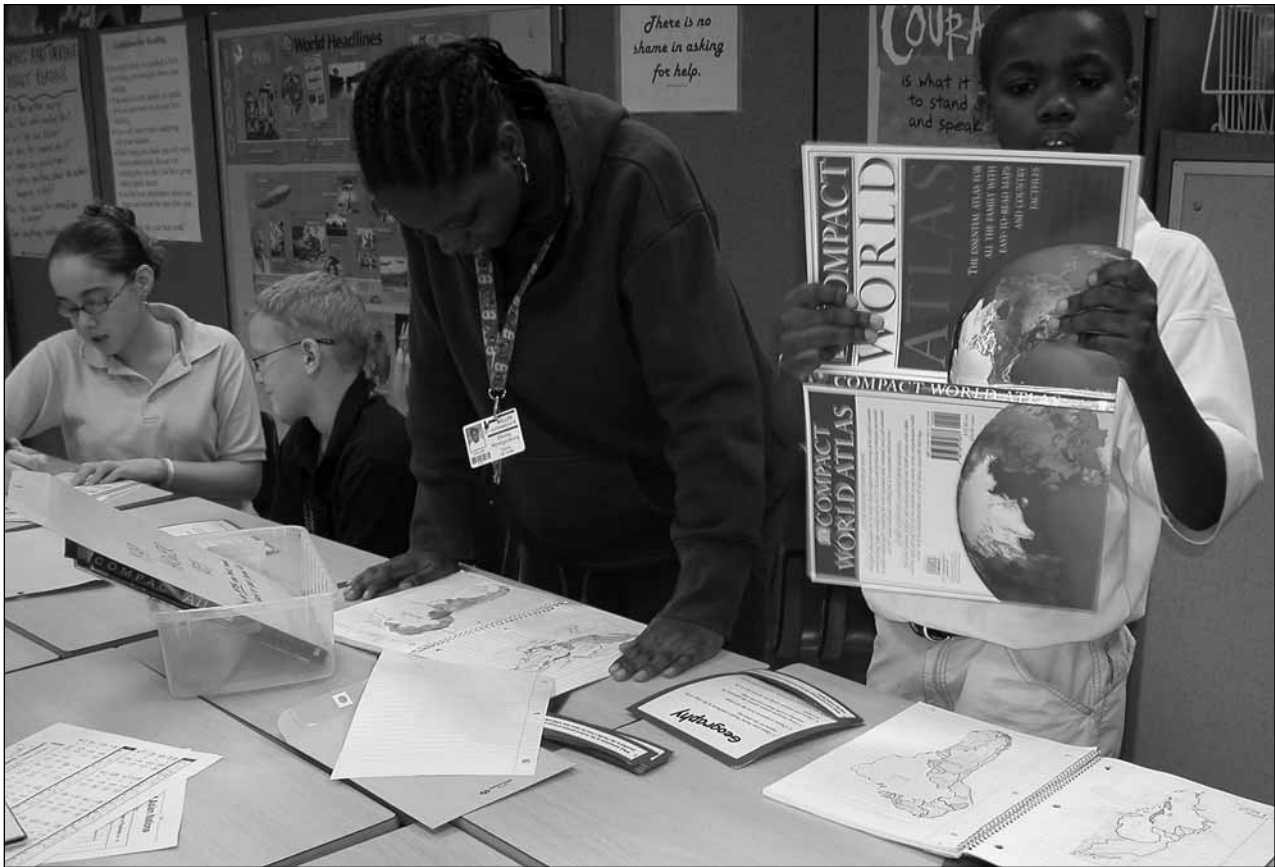
But as you walk around and talk to the kids, you find that they really know what they're supposed to be doing and why, and they are in fact doing it. You see a pair of students doing independent research at computers, using Web sites their teacher has book-

Kids work in pairs at buddy reading, newspaper, and word study stations in a sixth-grade classroom.



marked. Two more are sitting on the floor listening to a story from the basal reader on a tape recorder; they tell you that after they listen, they use comprehension task cards to guide their discussion and help

Two students work at the geography station while two others are at the word study station.



prepare them for the state reading test. In a corner two students are curled up in the classroom library, reading magazines and books. Two others are seated at a small table at the writing station, helping each other edit pieces from their writing folders from writing workshop. Another pair of students sits at two desks writing a news article for the class newspaper; all their materials are housed in a notebook labeled “Newspaper Station.” Two students create poems with magnetic words on the side of the teacher’s file cabinet. They show you how they use a rhyming dictionary as a reference tool, since they’ve chosen to write a poem with couplets. A pair of students is seated on the floor nearby with a small basket of books labeled “Buddy Reading”; they read and discuss a chapter from a novel the teacher has helped them select from the choices in the basket.

Two students stand by the whiteboard and test each other on this week’s spelling words. A pair of students is in the content-area station working on a social studies project; they are reading about the Civil War and taking notes for the song they’re composing together. At a group of desks, four students meet in a literature circle/book club to discuss a book they’ve been reading during independent reading time. Meanwhile, their teacher works with a group of five students, guiding their reading and helping them comprehend a nonfiction piece on skateboarding.

How can their teacher keep up with all that they’re doing? Isn’t this a lot of work for the teacher? Where are her worksheets? you wonder. Actually, this teacher has less paperwork to do than she used to. She is using literacy work stations effec-

tively in her upper-grade classroom. When asked, she explains that this type of teaching is much easier than she had thought—mostly because the students are so engaged, and she can actually teach a small group while the others independently practice things related to what she’s already taught. She has less grading of busywork and more time to spend planning meaningful instruction.

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Isn’t this like centers? I thought they were for kindergarten. There’s no time for this in upper grades. I have too much to teach! These are comments I’ve heard from teachers in grades 3–6 as they’ve pondered using literacy work stations. What is a literacy work station?

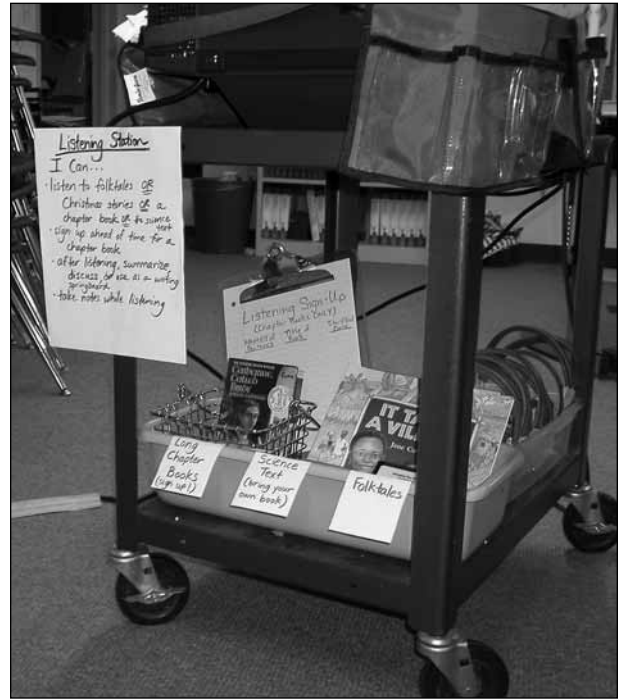
I define a literacy work station as “an area within the classroom where students work alone or interact with one another, using instructional materials to explore and expand their literacy. It is a place where a variety of activities reinforce and/or extend learning, often without the assistance of the classroom teacher. It is a time for students to practice reading, writing, speaking, listening, and working with letters and words” (Diller 2003).

Let’s break down this definition and take a closer look at each part of what constitutes a literacy work station.

An Area Within the Classroom

One problem teachers usually mention is that they don’t have enough space in their classrooms for centers. Literacy work stations use existing classroom furniture and don’t take up much extra room. For example, if you have an overhead projector, you have an overhead work station. Your tape recorder becomes your listening station. Your computers make up your computer station. Literacy work stations use classroom space effectively. They are not an extra; they are an integral part of instruction. The following chapters include space-saving instructions on how to set up each literacy work station.

Storing a tape recorder and supplies on the bottom of an overhead cart saves space.



Working Alone or with Partners

Many teachers also tell me that their classrooms will get too noisy if they use this type of active learning. I often suggest reducing the number of students working together to decrease the noise level and to increase student engagement. In literacy work stations, most students work in pairs, especially at the start of the school year. Sometimes I allow kids to work alone. Some actually prefer working solo and are less distracted when doing so. Remember that there are other times during the day for small-group work, such as in a social studies project, a science experiment, or a game in P.E.

Using Instructional Materials

Instructional materials already used in teaching are placed at the work stations. The emphasis is on the teacher modeling with materials first, working with the students to be sure they understand how to use

them, and then moving the materials into the literacy work stations for independent practice. I used to make and use lots of games with file folders, but I found that the kids who were most successful with them were usually the ones who didn't need the practice. Today I prefer teaching a strategy in a large or small group as part of my instructional time and then moving it into the work station for independent practice.

Variety of Activities

Choice is a big part of making literacy work stations successful. A station should include a variety of things for students to choose from, but not so many that it becomes overwhelming. I call this "controlled choice." It seems to work well when the teacher introduces several choices within one work station from which learners can select. Any of the activities there should provide the practice the student needs, but because the student has a choice, he or she actually learns more. In the following chapters are ideas for developing "I Can" or "I Will" lists, which help the teacher and students work together to negotiate a list of possible choices for activities at

The "I Can" list provides directions for third graders at buddy reading.



each work station. Some teachers put a colored dot or a star beside each activity that is a "have-to" and should be done first.

Time for Students to Practice

The emphasis at literacy work stations is on practice—meaningful, independent practice without the teacher's assistance. It is a time for students to practice all that the teacher has been modeling. Thus, activities placed at the literacy work station grow out of what the teacher has done during read-aloud, shared reading, modeled writing, shared writing, small-group instruction, content-area instruction, and so on. Things aren't put into the work stations just to keep students busy.

Literacy Work Stations Versus Traditional Learning Centers: The Benefits

A literacy work station is fundamentally different from a traditional center in several ways, as shown in Figure 1.1. The emphasis in literacy work stations is on teacher modeling and students' responsibility for their own learning. In traditional centers, the teachers often did too much of the work. They would, for example, think of ideas for the materials, make the materials, laminate them, cut them out, explain them, explain them again, and clean up after they were used. In addition, they would decide when to change the materials (usually every Friday afternoon) and what would be done with them.

In literacy work stations, students share in the decision-making process. They help decide when to change materials, and they negotiate ideas for what they'd like to do to practice at each station. No longer does the teacher change the centers weekly. This process is explained in more detail in Chapter 2. When setting up work stations, upper-grade students can help determine where to place them. They can even help write the directions for the

Figure 1.1 Differences Between Literacy Work Stations and Traditional Learning Centers

Literacy Work Stations	Traditional Centers
Materials are taught with and used for instruction first. Then they are placed in the work station for independent use.	New materials were often placed in the center without first being used in teaching. The teacher may have shown how to use the center once, but it was often introduced with all the other new centers at one time.
Stations remain set up all year long. Materials are changed to reflect students' reading levels, strategies being taught, and topics being studied.	Centers were often changed weekly to go with units of study. Materials often changed every week.
Stations are used for students' meaningful independent work and are an integral part of each child's instruction. All students go to work stations daily as part of their "work."	Centers were often used by students when they "finished their work." Centers were used for fun and motivation, for something extra.
Practice materials are differentiated for students with different needs and reading levels.	All students did the same activities at centers. There was not usually much differentiation.
The teacher and students write directions for activities together to share and build ownership.	The teacher wrote all the directions and prepared everything beforehand.
The teacher works with small groups during literacy work stations (doing guided reading, word study, and/or literature circles/book clubs) and differentiates instruction within each small group.	If the teacher met with small groups, each group often did the same task.

activities in the station, as well as create signs, management boards, and labels to keep things organized and running smoothly.

There are several differences between primary and intermediate literacy work stations, as noted in Figure 1.2. Transitional and fluent readers have special needs. These students are gaining in fluency as they learn to read and write with greater ease. However, as they move to longer, more complex texts, their fluency may decrease. At these levels, they often have good decoding skills but may lack comprehension. Or they may have difficulty with decoding longer words or certain vowel combinations. They also must learn to pay attention to new words and acquire specialized vocabulary in content areas. They need to learn to sustain interest and attention when reading longer books and writing longer pieces. They are reading silently most of the time and learning to do more revising and

A student checks out a book from the classroom library to read for an extended period during independent reading later in the day.



Figure 1.2 Transitioning Between Primary and Intermediate Grades with Literacy Work Stations and Meaningful Independent Work

K–2 Work Stations	Transitions	3–6 Work Stations
Independent Reading as a separate time from literacy work stations	Moving to longer period of time for independent reading and response writing	Independent Reading as part of independent work time (quiet versus active part); might work with one reading group during about twenty minutes of this time
Classroom Library	Move to silent reading for a longer period of time and include expanded responses to books read; use genres (like articles and nonfiction) they'll need for taking state reading tests	Classroom Library
Listening Work Station	Provide tapes for students who need extra support; expand to include social studies and science texts	Listening Work Station
Writing Work Station	Give students a longer chunk of time to practice writing strategies and include genres they'll need for taking state writing tests	Writing Work Station
ABC/Word Study Work Station	Transition to more investigative word study work with complex word patterns/etymology, vocabulary, and so on, especially as related to their own reading and writing	Word Study/Spelling Work Station
Drama Work Station	Provide opportunities for students to practice fluent reading with reader's theater scripts as well as develop comprehension through dramatizations and improvisations	Drama/Reader's Theater Work Station
Poetry Work Station	Move to more interpretation of poems, focusing more on inference	Poetry Work Station
Overhead Work Station	Can use overheads for cursive handwriting, grammar, and state test practice	Overhead Work Station
Social Studies and Science Work Stations	Become places for inquiry/research of topics related to science, social studies, and health	Content-Area Work Stations
Guided Reading Groups/Literature Circles	More students are moving into literature circles, sometimes combined with guided reading	Guided Reading Groups/Literature Circles

editing. They need to expand their reading and writing to a variety of genres.

As students move into higher and higher levels of reading and writing, your work stations will have to change to reflect their needs. You might have students go to just one work station a day, compared with primary classrooms, where they often go to two or three work stations daily. Students will probably stay at the stations longer than they did in the primary grades, because their reading and writing stamina are increasing. Independent reading time also expands in intermediate grades and is part of the independent practice time. Students often read and then write responses to what they read, sometimes in preparation for literature circles or book clubs.

Guaranteeing Independence

One huge benefit of using literacy work stations in your classroom is that students will be more motivated to work independently. However, to help students learn how to take on more independence, several conditions must be in place. Teachers must model appropriate behavior, allow for a gradual release of responsibility, provide a risk-free environment and a proper independent work level, and communicate clear, explicit expectations.

Modeling

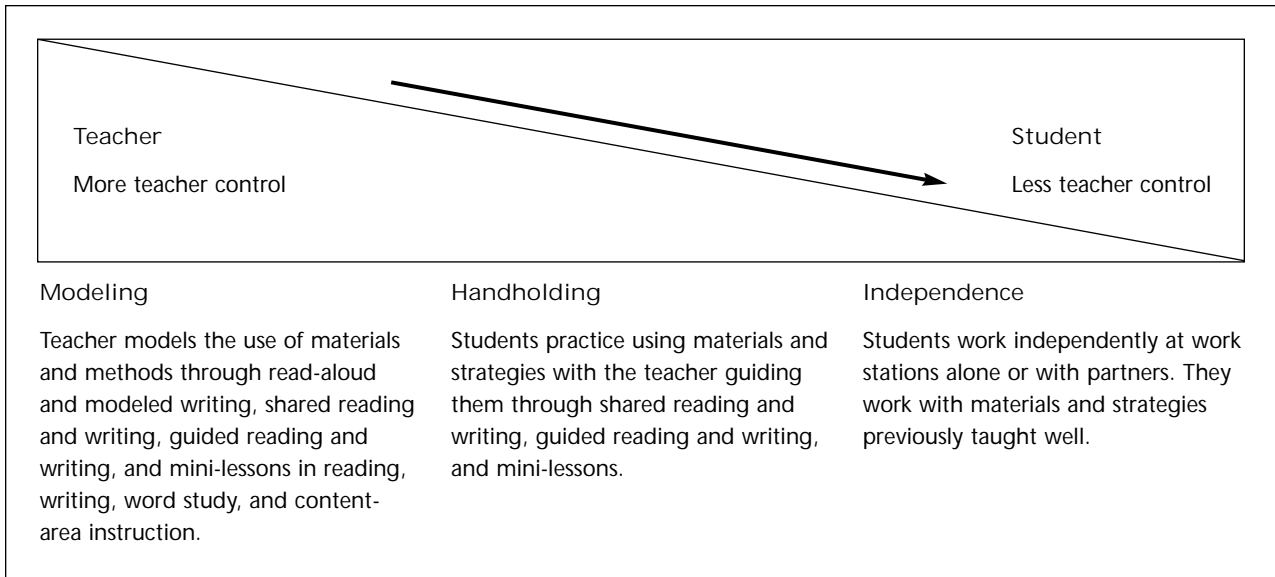
Teacher modeling helps ensure independent learning. Students need to see many demonstrations of how to use materials or do tasks before they can do them well on their own. Simply showing something once isn't enough for most learners, even adult learners. Brian Cambourne's *Conditions of Learning* model (1988) identifies demonstration as an important prerequisite for language learning. I have found that the most successful work stations are those using materials and activities that teachers have modeled most.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The best way to guarantee success at literacy work stations is through lots of modeling, with teachers gradually releasing more responsibility to the students. Pearson and Gallagher's *Gradual Release Model of Instruction* (1983) outlines this principle (see Figure 1.3). My favorite example of how I used the gradual release model to teach a new behavior is when I taught my teenage daughter how to do the laundry. First, she needed to learn about the materials to be used and to know what it looked like to do the laundry. She'd had fourteen years of "modeled laundry," so it was on to the next step! Next, we did "shared laundry." While we sorted the clothes together, I explained how to separate dark colors from white and told her why that was important. I set the temperatures while she watched, and explained why I used each temperature. (Because she bought some of her own clothes, she had a vested interest in the "whys.") In a few weeks we moved on to "guided laundry." Now she sorted and I checked; she set the temperature on the washer and dryer, and I checked; she hung the all-cotton pieces on hangers to dry, and I checked. When I was satisfied with her performance, she finally moved to "independent laundry." I was sure she could do it on her own, because I had *gradually* released the responsibility to her.

To best train students for literacy work stations, teachers do the same thing. They begin by modeling—showing students how to do something such as use a graphic organizer while reading. For example, during large-group time I might do a read-aloud of a newspaper article, such as the "Shortcuts" feature, available in the *Sunday comics*. Each week's edition is about a different topic, such as earthquakes, roller coasters, or electricity. I set the purpose for listening, instructing students to listen for interesting facts about and new words related to the topic, the Galapagos Islands. After reading, we create and fill out a chart

Figure 1.3 Gradual Release of Responsibility Approach, Pearson and Gallagher 1983



The teacher models how to use the materials for the newspaper station with the whole class gathered around. Two students help with the modeling.



recording this information. We might use this same type of informational text graphic organizer to map out information from material read in social studies or science several times (see Appendix D). I then move the blank chart to the “Shortcuts” newspaper station and make it available to students for independent practice.

Risk-Free Environment

Another of Cambourne’s Conditions of Learning is referred to as *approximations*. Students are encouraged to “have a go” at tasks as they practice them. Students learn best in a classroom where they feel safe and secure. They often learn more when working with a peer to practice something new. Eric Jensen (1998) explains how the brain learns best when threats are removed. Grading everything students practice can be threatening for some, because they are just learning how to do certain tasks. Use grades judiciously at work stations. Carefully select products to grade after students have had opportunities to practice. Students still must be held accountable for their practice time, but there are better ways to do that. Each of the following chapters has a section on “How to Assess/Keep Kids Accountable,” as well as “How This Station Supports Student Performance on State Tests.”

Independent Work Level

Sometimes students get into trouble at a work station when they cannot do a task independently because it’s too difficult for them. I see this often in classrooms, and it is common in the classroom library. Often when students are playing around here, it’s because they have chosen books that are either too hard or not interesting to them. Helping them choose books that are at their independent level will make this station run more smoothly. See Chapter 3 for ideas on this.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) explained that student learning takes place during the student’s “zone of proximal development” or

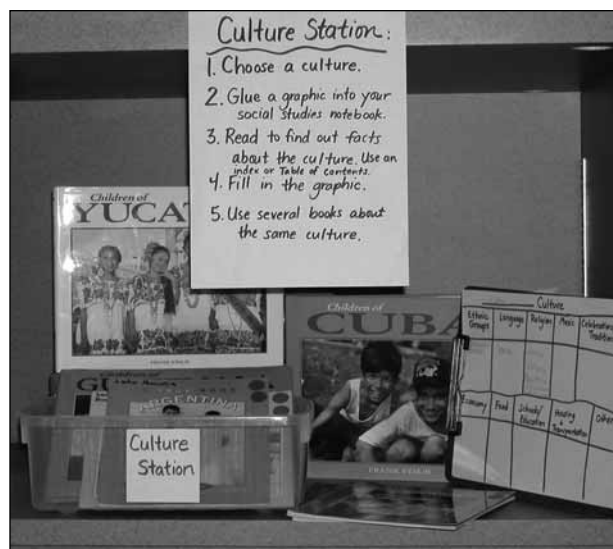
ZPD. Activities in the ZPD are just a little beyond the student’s independent level (or what the student can do totally on his or her own), things the student can do with the support of a peer. Sometimes the ZPD is explained as what students can do with support today that they can do on their own tomorrow. Social interaction is used to further the learning within the student’s ZPD. Just a bit beyond a student’s ZPD lies frustration. If you closely examine students who get into trouble in class, chances are you’ll find that some of them are being asked to function at a level above their current ZPD. This is why differentiation at literacy work stations is so critical.

Clear, Explicit Expectations

When I observe in classrooms, I sometimes notice stations that aren’t working well at all. I ask the students what they’re supposed to be doing at that station. Many times they don’t know. For example, in one fifth-grade classroom the word study work station was very noisy. I asked the students to tell me about what they were doing there. They said, “We’re supposed to be playing this game, but we’ve never played it before and aren’t sure how to do it.” That’s why they were arguing and talking off-task. I sat down with them and played a few rounds of the game until they knew how to play it; after that they worked fine on their own. If the teacher had shown them how to play the game first (perhaps in a small group, particularly for her struggling students), rather than just telling them to read the directions and play it, they would have been more successful and probably wouldn’t have disrupted the class.

In this book you will find suggestions for an “I Can” or “I Will” list to post at each work station. The list outlines what students can do at the station, which helps clarify expectations. Because the lists are developed with the students, they will better understand what to do at each work station. These lists, combined with teacher modeling, will head off many potential problems.

Directions made with the class for the culture station help students practice what they're learning about in social studies.



When working with upper-grade students, an alternative to the “I Can” list is to write directions for the station *with* your class. This promotes buy-in and clarification of what you expect kids to do when working independently. Have materials gathered that you want students to use in the station, talk about how to use them, and then write the directions together as a class. Post them with the station materials.

Why Should I Use Literacy Work Stations?

This book is dedicated to all the students who had “the gift of struggle.” This is a term I first heard Ellin Keene, co-author of *Mosaic of Thought* (1997), use in a workshop I attended. I thought of my daughter, Jessica, who had trouble learning to read. It was a struggle for her, but it was also a gift. As a beginning reader she said to me, “Mommy, my brain is not wired for reading. You’re going to have to make me practice every night.” This difficulty became a gift as Jessica learned to be patient with herself as a learner, as she practiced diligently and became

more and more skilled. Today she is a college student focusing on her strength as a learner in the field of biology; she learned how to study and work at something important to her; she’s an excellent reader and reads both fiction and nonfiction well. Her struggle turned out to be a gift, because it taught her to persevere. The gift of struggle can be helpful to you as a teacher, too. Whenever I have worked hard to help a student solve a problem, I have learned as much as the child.

Literacy work stations help meet the needs of *all* students, especially those who struggle with traditional pencil-and-paper tasks. I still remember the names of those I had trouble reaching in my third-grade classroom more than twenty-five years ago . . . Michael, Adam, and Lance. Reading was difficult for them, and they had trouble staying in their seats doing the “packets” I assigned them for independent work. They needed more hands-on work with manipulatives, more opportunities to read and talk with a partner, more chances to work beyond their desks. A little movement would have done them good! I don’t beat myself up for what I didn’t provide for them (I did the best I could with the knowledge I had at the time); instead I think of these students as a reminder of all the kids who need literacy work stations.

Eric Jensen writes about getting the brain’s attention in his book *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (1998). He suggests that to increase students’ intrinsic motivation and keep their attention, teachers should provide choices, make learning relevant and personal, and make it engaging (emotional, energetic, physical). These are exactly the factors that make literacy work stations successful.

Jensen writes that a change in location is one of the easiest ways to get the brain’s attention. At literacy work stations, students move to various places in the classroom to participate in learning with partners for a short time. He also suggests that teachers provide a rich balance of novelty and ritual. In contrast to seatwork, literacy work stations provide novelty as students partake in a variety of

tasks around the classroom. In each chapter that follows I show how to maintain novelty in work stations and thus engage students (and reduce behavior problems). Refer to the sections called “Ways to Keep the Station Going Throughout the Year.”

Teachers can do much to set up success for students by considering what students pay attention to and what engages them. To increase students’ attention to tasks, have them try one of the following:

- Play a game.
- Make something.
- Talk with a partner.
- Tell a story.
- Be a recorder (have a job to do).
- Move.
- Act it out.
- Do something new.

Literacy work stations provide all of the above and more.

Two students choose from a variety of word study games to reinforce vocabulary and spelling.



Making It Personal

As you read this book, make it personal. Feel free to write notes in the margins. Ask questions that pop into your mind as you read, and discuss them with a colleague. If what you’re already doing in your classroom is working effectively to meet the needs of every student, keep doing it. Use the parts of this book that make sense to you and that seem like they will engage students in more meaningful independent practice. Remember, there is no one way that will help everyone. Follow the lead of your kids. Ask for their input. They will show you the way.

Reflection and Dialogue

1. Share your new ideas about literacy work stations with a colleague. Discuss the definition of work stations provided earlier in this chapter.
2. Think about your students and their level of engagement. What specific things most engaged them recently? Make a list and plan similar kinds of activities.
3. Try using the gradual release of responsibility approach. Think about something new you’ve learned to do and how you probably went through a similar process. Plan for your first work stations using this model.
4. Work with a colleague to write a note to parents explaining literacy work stations. Include how and why you’ll use them this year. Taking the initiative with parents will head off many questions about what you are doing in your classroom.
5. Take baby steps. Choose one or two stations in this book that seem comfortable for you to start with. Use equipment and materials you already have in your classroom and can work with easily.